

Informal Buddy Support System for Military Reservists

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ABSTRACT

Deploying military members have a variety of support requirements which need to be met in order to ensure that they remain connected with home and family. Within the Canadian context, this role is fulfilled for Regular Force members by their unit's rear-party located at their home base in Canada. One of the duties of the rear-party is to address any family or personal matters that individual unit members experience during their deployment. Yet Reservists typically do not receive this type of unit support when they deploy. Recently, in response to the challenges faced by Reservists in Canada, a Commanding Officer instigated a rear-party advocate system as an initiative to better support Reservists and their families. This paper examines this system, colloquially known as the 'buddy system,' developed for Canadian Forces (CF) Reservists. This involved assessing the ways in which the system has been set up, how buddies were matched with deploying Reserve members, the role of the buddy in supporting the deploying Reservist and their family, the benefits and limitations of the system, along with recommendations for improving this system. These findings can be used to improve upon the existing system and assist other countries who either have, or are interested in developing such a system to better support their Reserve community.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

In 2007, the Inter-allied Confederation of Reserve Officers (CIOR), an independent body representing Reserve officers from 28 North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) members and 8 associated countries, held a symposium on Post-Deployment Care of Reservists. The symposium summary report noted that many countries have experienced challenges generating sufficient forces to sustain international missions in support of their post-cold war commitments to expeditionary operations (CIOR, 2007). Many of these nations have therefore had to draw on their Reserve Forces to a greater extent in order to meet their obligations. The CIOR symposium summary indicated that of current deployments, up to 25% of the individual nation's committed forces consisted of Reserve Force members.

The need to support these Reserve Force members and their families, the challenges faced in supporting them, and the ramifications of not supporting them adequately were all concerns addressed in CIOR's

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2007 Symposium. Reservists not only face many of the same deployment-related stressors that Regular Force members do, they also face unique challenges. Some of these challenges include,

...tracking/contact in the civil sector, loss of civilian occupation resulting from their deployment, separation from their operational unit and the inherent support including isolation from support bases, and families that may lack context and experience to understand their loved ones' trauma. (CIOR, 2007, p.1)

One of the main challenges in supporting Reservists is the consequence of their movement from the civilian sector to full-time military service when they deploy and their subsequent return back into the civilian sector post-deployment. Accordingly, CIOR (2007) indicated concern regarding the families of Reservists who may be less connected to the military, employers and the education system, as the Regular Force organization is not always well equipped to provide assistance with problems arising from these sources. How we support our Reservists in the face of these challenges has implications that extend well beyond individual well-being, and is a topic deserving of further attention.

Recently, in response to the challenges faced by Reservists in Canada, a Commanding Officer instigated a rear-party advocate system as an initiative to better support Reservists and their families, this practice has since spread to other units. Although the manner in which the system was implemented varied depending on the participating unit, in general, a non-deployed member of the Reserve unit serves as a contact and support for the deployed member and their family during deployment. This non-deploying member is colloquially known as 'the buddy.' This terminology has extended to the rear-party advocate system as a whole, which is commonly referred to as 'the buddy system.'

In accordance with CIOR's concern regarding Reservists and their families receiving adequate support both during and following deployment, the post-deployment care symposium produced a number of recommendations. The need for these recommendations arises from the fact that there are wide variations among NATO nations in the amount of support for Reserve members pre- and post-deployment in comparison to what Regular Force members receive (CIOR, 2007).

An informal buddy support system is consistent with two of the recommendations developed during the post deployment care symposium. One of the CIOR (2007) recommendations focuses on monitoring support provided to the family members of Reservists, and on developing processes to ensure their experience is equitable to that experienced by the families of Regular Force members. Ensuring Reservist families have adequate support is important since a lack of such support is one of the main factors contributing to post-deployment and reintegration difficulties (CIOR, 2007). More generally,

The "military family unit" does not exist for Reservists in the same way as with the Regular Force. There is no social safety net with other service families on bases or training establishments. Therefore the Reservist's family often faces greater isolation. Support also varies widely within different deployments within the same nation. In many cases, the support to family was provided based upon the willingness and commitment of the "rear-party" organizations for the unit deployed. Some units and organizations were very active while others never communicated over the entire deployment. (CIOR, 2007, p. 5)

The second recommendation that is consistent with an informal buddy support system as a means of supporting deploying Reservists and their families is having a "rear-party" advocate for Augmentees. Although there have been instances where Reservists have deployed as a formed unit, on many occasions it is individual Reservists who supplement deploying Regular Force units. However, it is possible for Regular Force members to deploy as Augmentees with another unit. Regular Force members who deploy typically have a "rear party" located at their home base whose responsibility is to assist them, and their families, with issues that might arise during their deployment (e.g., pay related issues) and their return

home (e.g., rights and obligations, available support resources). In light of this lack of formalized “rear party” support, it was recommended that Augmentees, in many instances Reservists, be assigned a rear-party advocate who is knowledgeable and experienced to assist them in solving any problem during and after their deployment (CIOR, 2007).

1.1 Purpose

Thus, the purpose of the present paper is to discuss research which examined the ‘buddy system’ developed for the Canadian Forces.

The main objective of this research was to better understand this version of an informal buddy support system. This involved investigating: 1) the ways in which the system had been set up; 2) how buddies were matched with deploying Reserve members; 3) the role of the buddy in supporting the deploying Reservist and their family; 4) benefits and limitations of the system and; 5) possible recommendations for improving this system.

It is anticipated that the findings from this research can be used to improve upon the existing informal buddy support system for CF Reservists and their families and can aid other NATO countries who either have, or are interested in developing such a system to better support their Reserve community.

2.0 METHOD

2.1 Participants

Participants consisted of 24 individuals who were: 1) Individuals involved in the implementation of the informal buddy support system; 2) Reservists deploying, or who had returned from deployment, and were matched with a buddy; 3) Reservists who served as buddies; 4) Reservists deploying or who had deployed and were not matched with a buddy.

With 5 year age categories spanning 20-54 years, the 30-34 year category comprised half of the participants, and the 20-24 year category comprised almost a third. Sixty-two percent of the sample consisted of junior non-commissioned members while 38% were senior non-commissioned members. Thirty-one percent of participants were married or living common law with no dependents (i.e., children or elderly dependents), 38% were married or living common law with dependents, and 31% were single (i.e., includes divorced, widowed, or separated individuals). Twenty-five percent of participants had five or fewer years of military service, 12% had six to ten years of military service, 44% had eleven to fifteen years of military service, while 19% had 16 years or more of military service. Forty-four percent of participants reported not having deployed on any United Nations (UN)/NATO tours, 38% reported being on one UN/NATO tour, while 18% reported being on two or more UN/NATO tours.

Also, although not formally included as participants in this research, individuals involved in formally supporting deploying military members and their families were consulted. They were asked about their experiences with Reservists and their families, what they thought the Reservists’ unique support needs were, and what types of support their organization provided. This provided the context with which to better understand how the informal buddy support system relates to the more formal support systems available to deploying Reservists and their families.

Individuals involved in the implementation of the system were interviewed about their roles and knowledge of the system. Reservists who had served or were serving as buddies, and Reservists who had

deployed either with or without a buddy, all participated in a focus group session and then completed a brief survey. Individuals who were unable to attend the focus group session were interviewed at a later date. As participants involved with the informal buddy support system, they were asked questions regarding the support needs of Reservists and their families, their knowledge and experience with the system, how the matching of buddies with deploying members occurred, their thoughts regarding the benefits and weaknesses of the system, along with any suggestions regarding improvements to the system.

2.2 Data Analysis

A content analysis was conducted on the focus group and interview data using conventional qualitative data-analytical tools and techniques. Specifically, NVivo8, a qualitative research software package created by QRS International (Melbourne, Australia) was used to identify and categorize themes and issues pertaining to specific interview/focus group questions as well as themes and issues that emerged from the focus groups and interviews. The analysis involved two stages.

The first stage involved a preliminary analysis of the data to determine the structure of the coding scheme. This process was done using a modified Delphi technique. The Delphi process as applied to this setting can be described as a consensus based method of aggregating opinions of a team or set of experts (Murry & Hammons, 1995). The co-authors and a member of the data-collection support staff met on two occasions to discuss and debate the coding scheme. Consensus was achieved on the second meeting, resulting in a coding scheme. This coding scheme was applied to a few of the interviews and focus groups to ensure that the coding scheme was able to capture all of the themes emerging from the data and that there were no gaps (i.e., data that is not able to be coded using the existing coding scheme). The adequacy of the initial coding scheme was assessed in two subsequent meetings at which time modifications were introduced. This more refined coding scheme was then imported into NVivo8.

For the second stage of the analysis, all the interviews and focus groups were analyzed by two individuals using the refined coding scheme. One individual coded all of the interviews while another individual also independently analyzed them. The same procedure was applied to the analysis of the focus groups. Each individual's analysis was then merged into one final document.

3.0 RESULTS

The following results pertain to the six main themes, and their respective subthemes, that emerged from the content analysis of the interview and focus group data. The three largest, i.e., most prominent, themes pertained to the flexible set up and use of the system, the nature of the relationship the buddy has with the deployed Reservist, and the nature of the relationship the buddy has with the family. The three other themes were the benefits of the informal buddy support system, the issues associated with use of the system, and recommendations for establishing and using the system.

3.1 Flexible set up and use

The largest theme pertained to what the implemented buddy system looked like or thoughts about what it could look like. The most consistent comments participants made about the system centered on the necessity for the informality of the system. They indicated that the system was informally implemented within their unit and that they preferred it that way. As one participant said, "If you try to formalize it too much...I don't think it will be as effective." The other comment that was frequently mentioned by participants was the need for flexibility of the system. As one participant noted, "...it all depends, every case is different so you can't make a model to fit every situation." In fact, there was no typical way in

which the system had been set up across units. In some units the focus of the system was primarily the deploying Reservist while in others the informal buddy system was a part of a larger family support system set up by the unit.

3.2 Nature of relationship with buddy

The focus of this theme was the nature of the buddy's relationship with the deployed member. This included comments regarding the frequency of contact and type of contact. Participants reported a wide variety of ways buddies and deploying Reserve members were matched. Many participants reported having a pre-existing friendship with their buddy, while some reported having a buddy assigned to them, and still others had an experienced senior Reserve unit member serve as their buddy. Many participants indicated, irrespective of how they were matched with their buddy, the importance of having a pre-existing relationship. One participant who served as a buddy on more than one occasion indicated that, "...the one fellow that I did have a pre-existing relationship with, there was a lot more contact, and it was a lot more deep and much more detailed."

The type and frequency of contact between the buddy and the deployed Reservist was partially determined by accessibility of phones and the internet. The most common method Reservists used to maintain contact with buddies was via the internet, i.e., e-mail or Facebook. Many participants reported limited time on the phone so this means of communication was typically reserved for contacting families back home. A minority of individuals sent letters or postcards. Care packages were also sent by buddies to the deployed member. Many participants indicated that communication between buddies and the deployed Reservist was informal, and simply involved saying "hi" and asking how things were. Some described the buddy as a link between the deployed member and their Reserve unit back home.

3.3 Nature of relationship with family

Next to the nature of the relationship buddies have with their paired Reservist, the buddy's relationship with the deployed member's family also emerged as an important theme. Some participants reported having a pre-existing contact with the deploying member's family while others did not know the family well. The benefits of having a pre-existing relationship with the family were noted by one participant:

...the benefit lies in that the buddy has a close connection with the actual family which works well if your buddy in Reserve life is your friend in civilian life, so the family feels comfortable dealing with them.

A few participants indicated that families were not really a part of the system, and that the system focused on the deploying Reservist. Others commented that some families do not really want to be contacted, by the buddy, or by the military in general. This partially influenced the amount of contact the buddy had with the family.

Participants provided many examples of the types of support provided by the buddy. These included assistance with chores, social outings, providing information, and listening to concerns the family had, for instance about the welfare of their deployed family member. It was remarked by a few participants that the buddy connected the unit with the family and vice versa. As one participant said about their buddy, "...he was like the middle man between.... my family and the unit."

3.4 Benefits

The benefits from the informal buddy support system emerged as one of the major themes. Participants mentioned benefits of the system as viewed from the deploying Reservist, their family, the Reserve unit, and the buddy. Some commented that individuals lacking an adequate social network would benefit the most from this system.

The main benefit of the system as expressed by participants was the reduction of stress for deploying Reservists and their family. As one participant said with respect to the deployed Reservist, "I guess they're always worried about how things are going at home, so it's a bit of a reassurance that there's somebody there to help keep an eye on things and help out."

As for the families, one participant noted, "...the families...they benefit from the, lower level of stress because they know, if they need anything, they have a number to call....and somebody will help them."

Another benefit that the deployed Reservist and their family experience is a sense of connection, of being cared for. This was reflected in a comment made regarding the benefits of having a buddy, "Like, you leave and there's still people there wondering hey what's up, what are you doing, that's not your immediate family."

With respect to the family members, one participant said, "...they need to feel connected...to the military and to... the member. And that's...one of the primary roles of the buddy system, is to keep them connected."

The major benefit of the system for the Reserve unit is that of communication. More specifically, the buddy provides a means for the Reserve unit to keep in contact with the Reservist during their deployment, and also post-deployment. This was reflected in the following comment made by one participant, "...we could use that person to get hold of them if there was something we needed to pass on and get some information we needed..."

The buddy also connects the unit with the deployed member's family. Additional ways in which the system could be of benefit, as noted by a few participants, is in assisting Reservists to reintegrate, and also by contributing to retention.

3.5 Issues

This theme focused on the challenges or drawbacks associated with the informal buddy support system. One of the issues participants mentioned was that they have other work-related responsibilities that needed to get done. Some participants reported having limited time to complete their duties and this would be another responsibility for them. Participants mentioned that obtaining greater support from the Canadian Forces, in the form of extra time to run the program, along with funding to support the program, would be useful. However, there was a concern about increased expectations that might accompany such support. This concern is exemplified in the statement made by one participant, "Funding is very tricky because... once you start funding the program then it has to be...measurable and it has to produce results."

Another concern was the stress that might be experienced by the buddy as a result of carrying out their role. Participants provided a variety of possible sources of stress including the family of the deploying Reservist not wanting to communicate with anyone in the military, the buddy not being able to answer questions that the family has because, for example, they do not have access to the required information, or if something happens to the deployed member. Acknowledging the important role played by buddies,

some participants indicated that buddies deserve more recognition for their contribution than they typically receive. It was felt that this could assist in recruiting future buddies. As one participant said about recognizing buddies:

It doesn't take anyone any time, money or energy at all to do it. But it's to recognize a person. And I think it's important because it makes the person feel like they did a good job, if of course they did a good job, it makes other people go, "If I did that job, I would get recognized too."

The last concern pertained to buddies not being able to fulfill their role. Examples provided when this might occur are: when the buddy leaves the unit or the military during a deployed member's tour, or when demanding commitments keep them from their buddy role. As one participant commented on this type of situation, "That can be difficult because you have to remember that they may start with a certain peer or buddy who may leave when they're on their tour."

3.6 System set up and use recommendations

The last major theme pertained to the recommendations made regarding the set up and use of the informal buddy support system. The first set of recommendations put forth by many participants involved ensuring the system remains flexible while at the same time providing it more structure. For example, allowing deploying Reservists to "opt out" of the system but ensuring on paper they have a buddy in case they unexpectedly require assistance.

The need to provide resources to better support the system was mentioned by participants. People were one type of resource mentioned. One participant discussed the use of a facilitator to aid in the organization of the system. Another mentioned inviting a variety of experts to come in to informally visit the unit and talk about relevant topics:

A support person, such as career counselor, or mental health counselor, or a psychologist, to just come out every once in while, we'll take them around and introduce them to the people, and they can have informal discussions with them about different things.

Others mentioned it would be useful for the members of the unit if recently deployed individuals would share their experiences. Another set of recommendations focused on support for buddies. For example, participants mentioned providing buddies with key contact numbers. Because of limited time, eliminating lengthy training for buddies was stressed by some participants. Otherwise, this might be a disincentive for buddies who volunteer for the role. The idea of having a 'back up buddy' or greater number of peer support members per deploying Reservists was discussed by some.

Improving communication was another recommendation. More specifically, units should provide more opportunities for buddies to meet with the deploying member's family before deployment. As one participant said:

...I think it would be easier if we had...some form of direct communication that was started by the unit before they went over as opposed to just like, "Here, you're the buddy, you know, to the family if you feel like it."

Also, some participants indicated that greater communication about the informal buddy support system needs to be provided to deploying Reservists and their families.

4.0 DISCUSSION

Individuals involved in the informal buddy support system reported that the system would be of benefit to deploying Reservists and their families. This supports CIOR's (2007) recommendation regarding the need for a "rear-party advocate" for deploying Augmentees. This informal system enables Reservists and their families to obtain the support they may require and do not receive through other formal support systems.

4.1 Role of Buddy System in Relation to more Formal Support Systems

This informal system is meant to complement existing support resources available to Reservists and their families. Formal support resources are available to deploying Reservists and their families. In the Canadian context, one such organization is the Military Family Resource Centre (MFRC) which has centres located across Canada. One of the MFRC's functions is to assist families of deploying military members by providing them with deployment related information, support services, etc. Although the MFRCs undoubtedly provide invaluable support to a number of military families, typically they are located on military bases. This poses difficulties for many Reserve Force families who for the most part do not reside on military bases. In fact, they may not reside in the local area where the MFRC exists. Accordingly, attending support groups, information sessions, or making use of available child care services may not be possible for Reservists' families. This undoubtedly is not a unique issue to the Canadian military context and this represents a situation where an informal buddy support system can be of benefit. If one of the criteria suggested in matching a buddy with a Reservist and his/her family is that the buddy be located in the same local area as the family, this would enable the buddy to have more contact and to provide more individualized support to the family than would be provided by formal support resources.

Aside from the geographic proximity of formal support organizations to Reservists and their families, another limitation is that these types of organizations are not familiar with the support preferences of individual families. However, since the buddy ideally has a pre-existing relationship with the deploying member and his/her family they have a better understanding of their support needs and preferences. The buddy could have a pre-deployment conversation with the family about their preferences regarding: 1) type of contact (i.e., e-mail, phone, in person), frequency of contact (e.g., once a week, bi-monthly, monthly), and type of support desired (i.e., information, someone to talk to about concerns, assistance with chores, someone to socialize with). It is important that the needs of the family be considered, as the receipt of unwanted support, or the wrong type of assistance, could in fact be an additional source of stress to the family (e.g., see Antonucci, Akiyama, & Lansford, 1998; Rook, 1984).

4.2 Flexibility and Informality of the System

One of the consistent messages to emerge from this research is that individuals want the buddy system to remain informal and that it be able to be adapted to suit the needs of different Reserve units. Participants felt that a "one size fits all" approach was not desirable. Reservists wanted the flexibility to set up and use the system in ways that worked for them. Factors such as geography, time constraints, number of Reservists deploying, number of new unit members, deployment experience of unit members, etc. could impact on the feasibility of setting up an informal buddy support system in one way versus another. Accordingly, in order to have this flexibility participants felt it was important to maintain the system's informality. In order for the system to be of most benefit it has to be set up and used in a way that is the most advantageous for a particular Reserve unit.

4.3 Duration of System

Participants indicated that the informal buddy support system needs to begin with pre-deployment and continue into the reintegration phase of the deployment cycle. The potential shortcomings of having a system that does not cover the full deployment cycle were apparent as evidenced in the current research. In some instances, a deployed member was assigned a buddy after the Reservist had already deployed. Thus, the buddy did not have the opportunity to meet the deployed member's family pre-deployment. It is during this time when the family may already be experiencing deployment related stresses such as pre-deployment training separation. This type of separation may be more difficult for the families of Reservists, who may not be as familiar with these types of longer separations and may not have the same types of support resources available to them as do their Regular Force counterparts (e.g., other military families living on base) (AMVETS, 2011; Smith, 2010). There are also benefits to extending the system beyond the point when the member returns from a deployment. This would allow the buddy an opportunity to informally talk to the person about how they are doing and whether they may be experiencing any deployment and post-deployment related issues. Ideally, the buddy would be provided with information regarding occupational stress injuries (OSIs) that would assist them in this endeavour. Extending the buddy system to the post-deployment reintegration phase would also be of benefit to the Reserve unit who may have limited contact with the member post-deployment. Thus, the buddy provides the unit with a connection to the recently returned member and their family which they otherwise would not have.

4.4 Importance of Pre-Existing Relationship

Matching a buddy with a deploying Reservist based on a pre-existing relationship, in particular having a friendship, was deemed the most desirable way to match individuals. Whenever possible, this matching should be done on a voluntary, and not on an assigned, basis. Having the buddy be familiar with the family prior to the Reservist deploying was also considered to be important. Ensuring the buddy has an opportunity to meet with the family pre-deployment enables a level of comfort to develop so that the family is not hesitant contacting the buddy when they require assistance. It also allows both parties to discuss preferences regarding the amount and type of contact.

4.5 Benefits of the System

The informal buddy support system benefits the deploying Reservist, their family, the buddy and the Reserve unit. For Reservists deploying, concern about the welfare of their family is one of the many stresses they may experience during their deployment. This stress is reduced by having someone, their buddy, "check in" on their family, ensure they are doing well, and assist them with any problems they may have. It also may make them feel more closely connected to their home Reserve unit as their buddy provides a mechanism through which their home unit can keep in contact with them and their family. As well, the buddy is seen as someone they can talk to back home, outside of their family. They understand them in a way their family does not (i.e., they can talk to their buddy about deployment & redeployment related issues they may not want to talk to their family about). Their buddy is viewed as someone who cares about their welfare.

For the family of the Reservist, knowing that there is someone they can contact if they need anything can reduce some of the stress they may be experiencing. What is also important is that the buddy can be contacted outside of the military's operating business hours if needed. The buddy can assist them with a

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variety of support needs (e.g., chores, listening to concerns, providing information, socialization) thus providing a sense of being cared for and supported.

The main benefit the system has for the deployed member's home unit is that it provides them with a way to communicate with the Reservist and their family. In fact, the buddy was viewed by some as being a mediator, someone who can assist each of these groups in communicating with one another. Typically, as soon as the Reservist commences pre-deployment training they are no longer considered to be a part of their home Reserve unit. They are now a part of the unit they are deploying with and thus have a different chain of command. Accordingly, their home Reserve unit loses contact with them during pre-deployment training and while they are in theatre. The buddy is able to bridge this gap by enabling the home Reserve unit to contact the deployed Reservist if they need to pass on any important information or if the Reservist needs information or assistance from their home unit. This role would normally be fulfilled by the rear-party system in the case of Regular Force members. The buddy is also able to convey information that the unit may want the deployed member's family to know including upcoming events or deployment-related information. Finally, the buddy allows the Reserve unit to be aware of how the Reservist is reintegrating. As one participant said,

....another positive is...for reintegration a lot of guys tend to disappear...and it gives us another way to make sure that we stay in contact when they're on leave through their buddy who is usually someone they're close with so knows how to get a hold of them.

Thus, the buddy, because of their relationship to the member they were matched with (i.e., typically a pre-existing friendship), can have a role to play in the reintegration process. They are in a position to know if their friend is experiencing problems, and be attuned to behaviour that is out of character for their friend.

Further, participants indicated that it is during the reintegration phase of the deployment cycle that the Reservist may particularly need the support of their buddy. More specifically, many of the participants who had deployed indicated that it was important during their deployment for them to receive support from their fellow deployed friends/co-workers and that they received the most amount of support from these individuals. While perhaps not unexpected, there are some potential drawbacks associated with the strong connections Reservists may make with the individuals they deploy with. In many instances, Reservists do not deploy as a unit but instead they deploy as Augmentees (i.e., they augment Regular Force units). Thus, connections are developed during pre-training and are maintained as they work side-by-side with the Regular Force members they deploy with. However, these relationships become severed post-deployment after the Reserve Force members return to their home unit. It is during the reintegration phase of the deployment cycle when the Reserve member is adjusting to life back in their home country when one of their most important sources of support is lost. This is where the potential benefits of the informal buddy support system may serve to fill that gap.

Buddies can also benefit from their participation in the informal buddy system. As one participant said,

...for the buddies...I think they feel like they had a significant role, not only in being able to help out a friend while he's deployed—but also to help in the larger mission that we're involved with....and I think they have a lot of personal satisfaction from caring for the family members.

4.6 System Limitations

There are a few limitations to the system with respect to its current implementation. First, running the system takes time. The importance of the informal buddy support system is recognized. However, Reservists indicated that they already have many duties that need to be completed during the time available to them in the course of their work hours with the Reserve unit.

There is also a concern for the possible stress that buddies may experience as a consequence of their role (e.g., how the buddy would manage with unexpected events such as injury of the deployed member, difficult family). Finally, there is the issue of what should be done when a buddy is no longer able to function in their role. These are the types of concerns that were taken into account when recommendations were developed for improvement of the system.

4.7 System Recommendations

System recommendations can be classified into four main categories. The first category focuses on recommendations regarding how the system should be structured. The second category focuses on the need for resources to further enhance system functioning. The third category of recommendations focuses on who would be best suited to the role of a buddy. The final category of recommendations highlights the importance of providing recognition for the contribution made by buddies.

4.7.1 System Structure

Keeping the system informal and flexible in order to best meet the needs of individual Reserve units is essential. However, there is a need for increased system structure. This supports the smooth running of the system. For example, one participant recommended that buddies make a 'mandatory courtesy call to families' once a month on their parade night to see how the deployed member's family is doing. Another recommendation put forth is for more than one buddy per deploying member, i.e., the need for a 'back up buddy' in case a buddy is unable to fulfill their role. Finally, ensuring that participation in the system is voluntary is also important.

4.7.2 Providing Resources

It is necessary to have support from all levels of the organization for the informal buddy support system. Providing resources is one way of supporting the system. An example of one such resource is having experts (e.g., psychologists, career counselors) informally visit Reserve units. They would speak with unit members about issues such as what to expect during the reintegration process which would assist buddies and returning members in better identifying OSIs.

Another valuable resource is the knowledge and experience gained by Reservists who have recently returned from a deployment. These individuals could share their deployment experiences with other members of their unit. This would be of particular importance to less experienced Reservists in the role of a buddy.

Having someone acting in the role of a facilitator would aid in the organization of the system. One of the functions of the facilitator could be to arrange meetings where buddies could meet to discuss any issues they may be experiencing. If the issue is of a sensitive nature, the buddy could meet one-on-one with the facilitator.

There is also a need to provide buddies with a brief one or two page document detailing key contact numbers, advice on how to best communicate with families about difficult issues, who to consult if they encounter a situation they do not know how to handle, and other relevant material. This would not only save the buddy time but would assist in alleviating some of the anxiety they may experience.

4.7.3 Effective Buddies

Aside from providing individuals serving as buddies with the resources to better enable them to carry out their role, it is equally important to ensure that individuals who volunteer to be buddies have the necessary pre-requisites to be effective buddies. Some of the characteristics used by participants to describe individuals who would make the best buddies are: maturity, reliability, good communication skills, a pre-existing relationship with the deploying Reservist, and if possible their family. Although it may not always be possible to find individuals who possess all of these characteristics and are willing to volunteer to be someone's buddy, it would be desirable to select individuals with as many of these attributes as possible.

4.7.4 Buddy Recognition

The final recommendation is that buddies receive recognition for their contribution. This serves two purposes. First, it thanks the buddy for their time and effort which is important since serving as a buddy is a voluntary role. Second, it can assist in the recruitment of buddies in the future and thus aid in sustaining the system.

5.1 Increasing Resilience

Finally, it is important to note that enhancing the support resources available to Reservists and their families through such avenues as an informal buddy support system is one way of bolstering their resilience. More specifically, social support is an external coping resource that is able to impact resilience through a variety of pathways. A number of studies have shown that the perceived availability and use of support lessens the negative impact of stress on health (see Berlin & Berlin, 1991; Schwarzer & Leppin, 1989; Uchino, 2006). In light of the many deployment-related stresses experienced by military members and their families in general, along with their unique Reserve-related stresses, the use of an informal buddy system is one way to enhance the coping resources available to them, thereby bolstering their resilience.

Ensuring that Reservists and their families are adequately supported is not only important for their health and well-being but also important for operational effectiveness. As the CIOR (2007, p.1) states, "...it is clear that inadequate post-deployment care of Reservists will result in these individuals not volunteering for future deployments, or will result in higher attrition rates. Either of these two eventualities affects future force generation capabilities."

More generally, it could be stated that inadequate care of Reservists and their families throughout the deployment cycle can negatively impact operational readiness. Not providing sufficient support to Reservists and their families could be considered an example of inadequate care. Enabling Reservists to support one another through such an informal buddy support system is one way of enhancing their support network. As one participant said of deploying Reservists' perception of the informal buddy system, "They feel good...like we've actually cared for these families and we've done right by these members in terms of caring for their families whilethey're deployed."

This perceived concern for the welfare of their families could not only impact on Reservist's decision to remain with their unit, but also with the military in general. On a somber note, as we finished writing this paper, the US Army News Service published a document indicating that the suicide rate in the US Army National Guard and Army Reserve nearly doubled from 2009 to 2010 (Army News Service as cited by Philipp, 2011). The reasons cited for this increase included lack of traditional infrastructure and peer support which may reduce suicidal thoughts and attempted suicides (AMVETS, 2011). Many of the

Reserve-related issues discussed in the current research (i.e., not living on a military base, inability to speak to family and friends about deployment related experience) were all noted as contributors to the lack of support experienced by US Army National Guard and Army Reserves (AMVETS, 2011). Thus, the need to better support Reservists and their families, and the importance of implementing informal peer support programs, such as a buddy support system, is clearly evidenced and timely.

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